

Ferguson, S. D. (2000). *Researching the public opinion environment: Theories and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. ISBN 0-7619-1531-1 (296 pp.)

There are many books on public opinion research. Most of these are focused on methodological aspects of survey research, while some discuss theoretical aspects of public opinion. Ferguson's book is an interesting mix of theoretical and methodical themes related to the use of public opinion research in organizations. The book surely is not meant to be a guide to design and execute an opinion survey. The central focus seems to be to acquaint the reader with the most important theoretical and research technical aspects of public opinion research. In reading the chapters I wondered for what kind of audience such a book would be interesting? The book mentions two audiences: academic and professional. The academic audience should come from "graduate courses that deal with public relations functions, the role of public relations in politics, corporate communication, issues management, political communication and public opinion", but only if these courses are given in a context with no attention for research methods and/or mass communication theory at all, for these topics are discussed on a very basic level. For the professional audience ("professional communicators in corporations, policy analysts and communicators in government, political consultants and political managers") the situation may be different. The professional in the field of management and public relations may use the book as an introduction to strategic and technical questions concerning the practice of public opinion research.

The book is divided into four parts. Part I examines theories and intelligence systems relevant to monitor public opinion. Chapter 1 reviews the classical debate regarding the role of public opinion in democratic society and the modern debate regarding the purposes and ends of public opinion research. These are not theories on the nature and structure of public opinion, but classical debates whether the public has a role to play in affairs of state. Taking a hardly elaborated 'populist perspective' in this debate, chapter 2 discusses the importance of listening to key publics, the sources that feed organizational intelligence systems, components of such systems and approaches to setting up the intelligence function in organizations. Corporate leaders and boards of directors face the danger that their personal sources yield to a biased picture of the situation. The chapter assumes that corporations are as interested as governments are in learning more about how people perceive their organizations and leadership.

Part II addresses the topics of monitoring and analyzing the media as a means to learn what is going on. Chapter 3 identifies questions that

can be asked by the opinion analyst, usually engaged in monitoring the media. It gives the communication manager examples of how the media work and examples of questions that focus on the monitoring of media. Chapter 4 describes some content analysis techniques used in research on textual data gathered from media sources, the Internet, correspondence focus groups and other communication content. It gives the business manager a background when faced with content analysis findings.

Part II gives a convenient introduction to, or better an inventory of, the basic steps of survey research, focus groups, Delphi techniques and Q methodology. The intent of Chapters 5, 6 and 7 is “to convey sufficient information to allow organizational researchers to frame research questions, construct and administer questionnaires, interpret the results of survey research and critique research carried out on their behalf by survey research firms” (xiii). But the discussion is limited to topic areas that are most relevant to the work of organizational communicators, who rarely implement large-scale survey research projects without the help of outside firms. So the emphasis in the chapters is on reading research reports, in the words of the introduction: “creating knowledgeable consumers and interpreters of survey research”. The chapters on survey research provide the reader with a discussion of common errors in designing studies, in sampling, in the framing and ordering of questions, and in interpreting results. Chapter 8 reviews the purposes, strengths and weaknesses of focus groups, stakeholder assemblies, Q methodologies and Delphi techniques, which are seen as additional alternatives for gathering opinion data.

Finally part IV examines the impact of the media. In chapter 9 theories on media effects are introduced and the ongoing academic debate on this topic is outlined. This debate brings into question the assumptions of organizational researchers who take for granted the powerful influence of media on audiences.

The book’s message is clear: although monitoring the media may give one a good impression of what is discussed, in order to learn about public opinion the manager needs survey research. The book provides professional communication workers and students from business schools a simple introduction to issues of public opinion research.

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